

FREEDOM OF CHOICE IN CAMUS' L'HOTE

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines one of Camus' best known short stories, entitled *L'Hote*, translated into English as *The Guest*. The story explores the concept of freedom in terms of the choices and decisions made by man. The paper first addresses the idea of absurd. Then existentialism is explored with reference to the leading philosophers of these movements. Finally, the short story entitled *The Guest* is analysed in detail; the traces of existentialism and the idea of absurd are followed and the discussion is related to the freedom of choice.

KEYWORDS: Choice In Camus' *L'Hote*

INTRODUCTION

Albert Camus, who was born in Algeria and who has been associated with the idea of absurd and existentialism, is one of the greatest French authors. Although he denied that he was an existentialist, many of his works are claimed to manifest the existentialist ideas. The present study examines one of Camus' best known short stories, entitled *L'Hote*, translated into English as *The Guest*. The story explores the concept of freedom in terms of the choices and decisions made by man. The paper first addresses the idea of absurd. Then existentialism is explored with reference to the leading philosophers of these movements. Finally, the short story entitled *The Guest* is analysed in detail; the traces of existentialism and the idea of absurd are followed and the discussion is related to the freedom of choice.

Camus lived and wrote during the troubled years of the Second World War. He was a French man born and educated in Algeria, which was then a colony of France. He suffered from being an insider as well as an outsider; from being neither totally French nor Algerian. Camus was troubled by harsh conditions in his youth, which prepared him to revolt for independence, personal responsibility and human dignity. Isolation, alienation, and colonialism were experienced by Camus and the effects of each can be observed in his novels and short stories.

The works of Camus represent the moral conscience of France during the 1940s and 1950s. He reaffirmed the merits of individual freedom as opposed to the evils of colonial exploitation. The idea of man in a state of hopelessness is presented in Camus' writings because his era witnessed the slaughter of millions of people, and vandalized cities. The terror, horror and evil of his time resulted in people's feelings of fear and insecurity. The feeling of distrust gave way to the feelings of irrational anxiety, depression and vainness. Man feels as if he is condemned to eternal exile in this world. Camus uses the metaphor of man who finds himself in eternal exile. He argues that the exile is inevitable because man is deprived of the memory of a lost native land or of the hope of a devoted land. The breaking of the link between the man and his life or the actor and his stage is just a representation of the absurd.

THE IDEA OF ABSURD FOR CAMUS

The term "absurd" literally means "senseless, illogical, or untrue". Camus uses the term to claim that everything

in the world is contrary to all reason or common sense and to refer to people who became aware of the world's inconsistency and irrationality. According to Camus, man desires order, meaning and reason in the universe, yet he finds chaos. Therefore, there is a contradiction between man's expectations and the reality. Camus asserts that we can never find the order and meaning which we hope for in the world. Therefore, we can relate our hopes to something like God beyond this world or to fate. The question arises here: if there is no meaning in the world, does it mean that life is not worth living? If the answer is yes, then we should either turn to God/fate or commit suicide.

Camus is well known for his claim that "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (Camus, 1991, 3). The protagonist in the Myth of Sisyphus acts like a hero, does not escape from rebellion, and stays away from suicide. Camus argues that suicide attracts us because it is an escape from the absurd world but that one has to shoulder the responsibility of embracing and facing the absurd (Aronson, 2012). The argument as quoted from Camus presupposes that man searches for a meaning in the world and the meaning he seeks would be a ground for his ideals and values. Man desires that reality is a process consisting of an objective moral order. Man wants to be assured that his life is a part of an intelligible process and he is directed to an ideal goal. However the world is not rational and is revealed to have no particular meaning or purpose. This confrontation gives way to the feeling of the absurd.

The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it. The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter—these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable. (Camus, 1991, 28)

The feeling of the absurd manifests itself in different ways, like recognition of the finality of death or the pointlessness of life's routine. It is unbearable to live without a meaning in the world. Then the problem of suicide appears. However, suicide is not something Camus recommends because suicide means captivation by the absurd. What Camus suggests is living in the consciousness of the absurd and yet revolting against it. "He came to lay more and more stress on revolt against injustice, oppression and cruelty rather than on revolt against the human condition as such" (Copleston, 1994, 394).

The man who confronts the absurd should accept the reality of a life deprived of meaning and purpose and yet accept to live in it. Absurd is a contradiction which can never be settled on. The search for convention is seeking for a way to escape from reality. In fact, confrontation with the absurd is fighting against it. Life with the absurd is a matter of confrontation with this basic opposition, having an awareness of it and yet maintaining. The confrontation with the absurd does not necessarily require suicide, but does allow us to live our lives to the utmost.

In his opinion suicide means surrender to the absurd, capitulation. Human pride and greatness are shown neither in surrender nor in the sort of escapism indulged in by the existential philosophers (*les philosophes existentiels*, such as Jaspers) but in living in the consciousness of the absurd and yet revolting against it by man's committing himself and living in the fullest manner possible. (Copleston, 1994, 393)

According to Camus life with the absurd comprises three features. The first characteristic is the rebel. The man who

confronts the absurd rebels against it and he does not accept any solution or compromise in his fight against life. He never stops searching for a unity and order in life, yet he is always aware that it is impossible. There is no room or hope for a solution in this rebellion and this hopeless revolt defines the absurd man. The second feature is freedom. Once he has confronted the absurd, man is free to think and decide. His thoughts and decisions are his own and there is always a possibility to choose something else or think in another way. He emphasizes that the freedom he describes is not metaphysical. He is not concerned with the discussion about man's freedom in the world. On the contrary, he argues that he can only experience his own freedom. In this way, Camus concludes that the absurd man is free because he has given up the idea that life has a meaning and thus he does not feel the necessity to act towards a target. The absurd man lives free from all thoughts and restraints that we follow to live in accordance with the society. The final characteristic of an absurd life is passion. Man should pursue a life full of various experiences which will enrich his life. Passion for the variety and the unknown in this world will help us to cope with this meaningless world. The absurd man is not concerned with the future or the past because he lives at the present moment and the now seems more exciting and filled with passion.

Camus gives four examples for the absurd life. The first example is the life of the seductive man who follows the passions of the now. The second example is the life of an actor. An actor can perform on the stage hundreds of passions that can be inherent in life. The life of the conqueror is the third example of an absurd life. The conqueror is someone who uses his energy for political rebellion. Finally the life of an artist is an example of an absurd life. The artist is the one who creates the whole world. He does not try to explain the absurd world but rather tries to describe it. The artist presents a view of the world dealing with particular matters of the world and does not touch universal issues. No matter which life he leads man has to cope with and maintain his struggle in this absurdity, knowing that there is no order in this world. Camus asserts that what stops us from committing suicide is that our instinct for life is greater than our reasons for suicide.

Camus claims that it is difficult to describe the feeling of the absurd; instead the feeling can be exemplified with certain events that describe the experiences resulting in the feeling of the absurd. We feel overwhelmed when we become aware of the absence of meaning and purpose which we impose on things. For instance, when we see a dead person we feel that it is our inevitable, cold and unfeeling end. This is an example of how we confront the absurd.

The human mind longs for unity and completeness which is a desire for a reduction of the universe to an intelligible and complete form. In this way man believes that he can find a meaning inherent in life. However, Camus argues that this is impossible. Even a scientific theory can describe but cannot explain the world. The world consists of variations and many perspectives are needed to understand it. Thus, the search for a unique view of reality is a vain struggle. The world is irrational; the absurd arises from the opposition between a world we believe we can conceive and a world that is not rational. Neither the human mind nor the world itself is absurd. Yet, absurdity arises from the opposition of these two.

CAMUS IN THE EXISTENTIALIST CIRCLE

Camus denied that he was an existentialist and he argued that if Sartre was an existentialist then he could not be considered as one. However, his ideas as represented in his writings are found to be connected to the existentialist arguments. The absurd world is approached by existentialism from different aspects. Man has been detached from his origins, has lost his trust in the past, is alienated from the society, and feels unhappy and restless. The individual man feels threatened by others in the society. The major argument of the existentialist movement is "existence precedes essence" as quoted from Sartre. Man exists first and he has the responsibility to create his own essence. Each man forms and defines

himself by taking part in life, by revolt and by suffering.

During the mid-19th century, exhausted by corruption, man falls into depression when he questions himself and his identity. The core of this questioning is man and the problem of his existence. The questioning is not carried out in general terms, rather, the individual is at the focus of interest. Firstly, there is the existence of the self, which then develops its essence. Therefore, it is impossible to make an initial description of man because he is nothing prior to living. Man will make himself during his adventure in life and will be just like how he forms himself.

Existence is in need of freedom. Man is the only being that is free to choose, determine and form his essence in one way or another. That is, man can choose himself, shape his essence with free will and be the masterpiece of himself. Man's possibility and freedom to choose his essence is his great responsibility. He has to live with the responsibility to choose courage or cowardice, good or bad, moral or immoral etc. We do not have the chance to choose certain things like nation, race, sex or physical features. However we have the chance to respond as "yes" or "no" to the circumstances, events or developments with which we live. The act of decision making is continuous because at each moment we may come up with various choices or opportunities. This decision making process is man's process of existence, which can never become constant.

Man is in great depression because he has been created and thrown into this world without any particular reason and without his request. Man has to face the responsibility to make his own decisions and create his own essence. The responsibility that he has to shoulder is so hard for him that he finds himself in depression and nausea. Existentialism describes the condition of man as having no consciousness of a harmonious or orderly universe. Everything is accidental and aimless; thus, man finds himself in chaos and realizes that it is impossible to give a rational explanation of the world. Man is not born having inherited certain features; his characteristics are obtained by his actions, and in this way, he realizes himself. Man first acts and then exists.

In this absurd and chaotic world, depressed by his responsibilities, man believes that it is meaningless to live. Although he knows that the inevitable end is death, he still struggles to realize himself and generate his essence. In this chaotic world there is no harmony and any effort towards a world of order is in vain. The absurd world results in alienation, loneliness, and lack of interaction. People no longer trust each other; they live in fear, anxiety and suspicion and feel there is a constant threat. This is the process of isolation and alienation of men from one another. Disharmony, alienation and lack of communication lead man to a depeopled world.

The connection between the idea of the absurd and existentialism in Camus can be established by reference to the decision making process. Man is forced to make choices in this absurd world. Man is free to choose from a number of alternatives and he is condemned to be free. This is the hardest responsibility he must shoulder and there is no way to deny this responsibility. The story entitled *L'Hôte* demonstrates the connection between Camus' approach to absurd and his relation to existentialism.

DECISION MAKING IN THE WORLD OF THE ABSURD

In this section, the story entitled *The Guest* is analysed and the major aim is to establish the link between absurdism and existentialism in Camus. *The Guest* is one of the best known short stories written by Camus and was first published in 1957 in his story collection entitled *Exile and the Kingdom*. Camus was not considered to be a philosopher, but the way he handles the nature of man, the concepts of justice, freedom or responsibility and the ideas of absurd and

existence encourage critics and readers to engage him with philosophy. In his *The Guest*, Camus delves deeply into the idea of colonialism while he contextualizes the story in Algeria, which was a French colony in Camus' era. *The Guest* explores some of the moral and philosophical themes by evoking life and relationships in a colonial context. Camus wrote this story during the crisis leading to the Algerian war, which would eventually end with the independence of Algeria from France, and he portrayed French and Arab Algerians and their relationships.

The setting of the story is the eve of the Algerian uprising, during one October in the early 1950s. The scenery is a desolate plateau in Algeria after a blizzard. Most of the story takes place in a school building on that isolated plateau surrounded by mountains in the east and west. Camus prefers to attend to dualities like day followed by night or a blizzard followed by sunshine. The protagonist of the story, Daru, is a French Algerian schoolmaster and is confused when he encounters a "guest". The presence of the guest is unpleasant for the schoolmaster because he is assigned to deliver the guest to the nearest prison. Daru's guest is an Arab prisoner and he is unwilling to host him in his school and take him to the prison the next day. The Arab prisoner was brought by a gendarme and handed over to Daru to be taken to the prison. This seems to be absurd because the police soldier could hand the Arab over to the prison himself, which is supposed to be the duty of a gendarme, not of a schoolmaster. Daru accepts the assigned duty against his will which is also absurd.

When the narrator introduces the setting, the board in the classroom is described as having drawings of a map. The reader understands that the last lesson in that classroom aimed at teaching the geography of France. "On the blackboard the four rivers of France, drawn with four different colored chalks, had been running toward their estuary for three days now" (Camus, 2007, 67, 68). The attention on the map drawn on the board of the classroom manifests the effects on living in a colonial environment. The pressure on teaching, adopting and internalizing the ways of the exploiter are evident in colonial life. The native Arab children are forced to learn and embrace the geography, the language, the lifestyle, and the rules of France because they live in a colony of France. This motif exemplifies what Camus means by absurdity. It is a meaningless world that people are living in because they are forced to be someone else, to learn things they don't want to or to get accustomed to the styles of other people.

Daru is introduced as a compassionate French man helping his students who come from poor villages nearby. The poor people are represented as native Arabs of Algeria who have been suffering from drought and poverty. Daru is presented as someone who aids his students and families by distributing food provided by the government. In the exposition of the story Daru is described as being alone in the school building for three days without his students who are prevented from coming by the snow. The suspense arises at the beginning when Daru notices two men, one on horseback, one on foot, coming from the hill. The suspicion decreases as they come closer when Daru recognizes the man on horseback. The horseman is introduced to the reader as Balducci and the narrator refers to the other man, with hands bound, as the Arab. At the outset of the conflict between Algerian nationalists and French colonialists, the Arab was to be punished for murder. The reason for the murder and whether the Arab actually killed someone are left in doubt.

The way Daru treats the prisoner is humane and there is a naïve and unprejudiced relationship established through respect. Daru is faced with a moral dilemma: should he turn in the prisoner or let him free? The next morning Daru leaves the prisoner at the crossroads where he points in two directions, one to the prison, the other to freedom. He copes with the dilemma by leaving the decision in the hands of the Arab himself. This is very closely connected to the idea of existentialism which puts an emphasis on the importance of the decisions that man makes. *Choices* is a major theme in the story and existentialists emphasize the formation of the essence of an individual by means of the choices made out of

different alternatives. Each character in the story has to decide on a moral dilemma. The gendarme's decision is to assign Daru for taking the Arab to the prison instead of handing him to the prison himself. Daru's decision is to leave the responsibility to the prisoner and so he lets the Arab to his own direction. What existentialism emphasizes is that man has to shoulder the responsibility to create his essence, which was not given with his existence. Man has no chance but to be free; in all circumstances there are alternative choices and man has to decide which one to choose for himself. The process of decision making is significant and a hard responsibility to cope with; that is why the characters pay attention to it. Balducci leaves it up to Daru and Daru leaves it up to the prisoner.

Camus argues that there is no inherent meaning in life yet we still confront this meaninglessness and struggle with it. In this absurd world, the society may demand certain actions and the story explores whether the individual's decisions are affected by these demands. The story also questions if man has free will and if moral and social obligation affect man's decision making process. The gendarme brings the Arab to Daru's school because his profession demanded it and yet he does not do what he is ordered to because he himself could take the prisoner to the prison. Daru accepts the delivered guest because he has a sense of responsibility to the French government. However, Daru does not fulfil his obligation when he leaves the prisoner at the crossroads and lets him decide for himself. In that case, he chooses to deny his responsibility to the French government. Daru has to spend the night in the school building with the prisoner before the journey to the jail. This fact leads him into another decision making process: whether to treat the prisoner civilly or not. Here, it is useful to mention the narrator's use of the definite article when he refers to the prisoner as "the Arab" just like talking about an inanimate object or an animal. However, the way Daru treats the prisoner is as if he is welcoming a favourite guest. The actions performed by Daru towards the prisoner are civil and humane. Yet, the narrator's use of the name, "the Arab" and Balducci's bringing him tied with a rope symbolizes that some perceptions have remained inhumane. The idea of free will is also observed in Daru's actions when he disobeys the directive and leaves the Arab at the top of a hill and presents him with two alternatives. Daru's choice of not taking the prisoner directly to the prison manifests how he values man's reasoning abilities. The prisoner has to decide what is right and what is wrong and it is his process of bringing his essence into existence. As an individual being and a being with free will, the prisoner has to decide what is moral and what is immoral. The absurdity in life lies here. The meaningless world can be challenged only by giving decisions and taking actions accordingly.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been emphasized that Camus is associated with the idea of absurd. Besides, no matter how much Camus denied it, the arguments of existential thought can be traced in his writings, one of which was the problem of the present study. The intersecting point of absurdism and existentialism in *The Guest* is the theme of choices. The idea of the absurd is an assertion of the lack of an inherent meaning in life. Life does not offer us a logical, orderly and meaningful world. When confronted with the chaos of the universe, man feels exhausted, depressed and powerless. The way to cope with the absurdity of life is to confront and struggle against it. The struggle of man against the absurd comprises a series of decisions that will be made. What we choose among a number of alternatives, the actions we take, and the attitudes we adopt generate ourselves during this struggle. The idea of the absurd is attached to the existentialist approach in terms of our actions and choices. During our struggle with the absurd world we create our essence. We exist first and then generate our essence in this absurd world in which we are all free. Camus' sense of individual freedom and self-determined life are manifested in the story examined in the present paper. The individual's emotions, actions, responsibilities and thoughts are

emphasized through the description of Daru, Balducci and the Arab.

In Camus' world man lives alone and makes his moral decisions alone. Loneliness is an inevitable element of the absurd life. In loneliness and isolation, man processes to define himself by his choices. The protagonist, Daru is isolated because he lives without a family, friends or neighbours and even his physical surroundings on the desolate plateau display his alienation and isolation. The racial conflict which dates back to when the French first colonized Algeria is one of the elements that triggered the absurd context of the story. The minor French group dominated the large Arab population. As he grew up in colonized Algeria, Camus was influenced by the conflict between the French and the Arabs. The protagonist, Daru feels sympathy for the native Arabs, yet he cannot give up his ties to the French. Daru's recognition of Algeria as a part of France is seen in the map drawing on the board of his classroom. However, Camus emphasizes that in the world of the absurd, many deeds are performed or many laws are legislated without any meaning or objective assigned. Daru is teaching the geography of France in a country which is distant from France and he is teaching it to the native Arab students who have been colonized. The native Arabs are living in unrest and poverty and French geography is probably one of the final things that they would be interested in.

The Guest is one of the best examples of Camus' works describing his belief in an absurd world. Man is forced by his government, society or family to do certain things or to think in a certain way. The difficulty, the agony, the complexity and the necessity of moral choice are explicitly portrayed in the story. Balducci's decision to leave the prisoner in the school for Daru to take to the prison, Daru's letting the prisoner to decide his own direction, and the Arab's preference for the way to the prison, are all outcomes of the moral choices made because of the necessity of man's existence. It is a must for man to choose one thing instead of the other. Existentialists argue that there is always a choice: man cannot escape from choosing. Additionally, man has to live with the consequences of his decisions and choices.

Final remarks are saved for the title of the story and its English translation. The French title *L'Hôte* is homonymous; it means both "the guest" and "the host". In the English translation, "the guest" was preferred as the equivalent. The title Camus chose is ironic and intentional because the guest is presented as if the Arab is the guest of Daru. However, when the verbal irony is considered, the Arab people are native to Algeria. Actually, the guests are the French people. That is the absurdity of life: you live in your home and suddenly you are labelled as being a guest.

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